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CIA use of journalists condemned

By A. J. McILROY in
Washington

JOURNALISTS have expressed alarm at the Central Intelligence Agency's censorship powers over its former employees and at the agency's use of reporters in spying operations.

In evidence to the Senate Intelligence Committee they urged legislation to curb the agency's censorship powers and to ban it from using news organisations and journalists as covers for operations.

"It is imperative for the survival of an independent Press to maintain at arm's length relations between government and the Press," Mr Robert Lewis, of the Society of Professional Journalists, told the committee.

Mr Joseph Sterne, editor of the BALTIMORE SUN and a member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, said: "If the people of this country and the world are to have faith in a free and independent Press they must know that CIA agents are prohibited from masquerading as journalists in undercover operations."

Both men were presenting their respective organisations' evidence to the committee, which is considering a proposed charter governing the operation and policies of the CIA and all American intelligence agencies.

All 'tainted'

Mr Lewis said that to allow the CIA to use journalists as informants suggested that the American Press was an investigative arm of the agency "and taints all American correspondents working overseas with that suspicion."

Both organisations opposed proposals before the committee to exempt the CIA from the Freedom of Information Act, legislation that gives American newspapers and broadcasting media wide powers of access to government information.

Current provisions of the law, which allow the CIA to withhold properly classified information that could cause identifiable harm to national security, "give the CIA ample protection already," Mr Sterne said.

The Society of Professional Journalists was concerned over the scope of the secrecy agreements that all CIA personnel were required to sign. Mr Lewis said that in effect they were forced to sign away their First Amendment rights of free speech for the rest of their lives.